

Is that perverted or what? I mean it. You think I am joking? Look around your neighborhood. Second only to the sheep are the women's rear ends that are sprouting up all over. I guess the idea is that it is supposed to look like the woman is working in the garden and all you can see of her is her least flattering exposure.

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Talk about an offense to human dignity. And now it isn't just women--now you are seeing wooden men in an equally undignified pose.

Well, I tell you, it is time to put a stop to the racist and sexist assaults on human dignity that we see on our nation's lawns. Look at their record of taste violations: little plaster African-Americans who have nothing better to do than stand around all day holding lanterns, plaster nude ladies, fountains that look like little boys peeing (Jeez, whoever gets his/her jollies from this last sort of "art" is one sick puppy, I can tell you!), plastic flamingos, religious statues covered and protected by old bathtubs. And the last administration was trying to crack down on what they claimed was perversion sold on newsstands. The real purveyors of perversion, sickness, and filth are our nation's garden shops.

3. From Charlie Harris, the following "strange but true" story:

It really happened: During a commercial break on WABC-TV's "Siskel and Ebert 500th Anniversary" special today, the following three commercials were aired in the following order:

1. Fair Oaks Hospital [specializing in drug abuse treatment]:
Distraught mother's voice over telephone: "My son's behavior has changed drastically! I'm worried about him."
Reassuring doctorly voice: "Fair Oaks can help."
2. Mikhail Baryshnikov in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis."
3. Raid Max roach killer.

4. The following books were donated by Linda Armbruster:

Amis, Kingsley et al (ed.) SPECTRUM II

Bensen, D.R. (ed.) THE UNKNOWN
Bester, Alfred STARLIGHT - GREAT SHORT FICTION OF BESTER
Bleiler, Everett F. et al FRONTIERS IN SPACE
Carr, Terry (ed.) THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF THE YEAR 6
Conklin, Groff (ed.) FIVE-ODD
Conklin, Groff (ed.) THE BEST OF SCIENCE FICTION
Davidson, Avram (ed.) THE BEST FROM F&SF: 13TH SERIES
Del Rey, Lester THE EARLY DEL REY
Gold, H.L. (ed.) THE FOURTH GALAXY READER
Gold, H.L. (ed.) THE FIFTH GALAXY READER
Gold, H.L. (ed.) FIVE GALAXY SHORT NOVELS
Harrison, Harry et al BEST SF 1967
Heinlein, Robert STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND
Matheson, Richard I AM LEGEND
Merril, Judith (ed.) THE YEAR'S GREATEST SF AND FANTASY
Nolan, William F. (ed.) THE PSEUDO-PEOPLE - ANDROIDS IN SF
Wollheim, Donald A. (ed.) THE 1975 ANNUAL WORLD'S BEST SF

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The following book was donated by Laura Woodworth (and she's not even a member!):

Rasmussen, Alis A. THE LABYRINTH GATE

5. Note that the HO Librarian and the Library have moved. [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
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...mtgzx!leeper

Each generation of critics does nothing but take the
opposite of the truths accepted by their predecessors.
-- Marcel Proust

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Batman
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: A triumph of visual imagery over story for the music video generation. Ironically, Keaton is better as Batman than Nicholson is as the Joker. The art design is superior but just about everything else is pedestrian. Better than the television series or the serials, not as good as the comic. Rating: 0.

"[The] mind craves [images], and, of late more than ever, the keenest experimenters find twenty images better than one, especially if contradictory; since the human mind has already learned to deal in contradictions."

Henry Adams, 1907

Excuse the pretentiousness of starting a review with an 82-year-old quote, but Adams might very well be talking about B_a_t_m_a_n, whose images, often contradictory or of clashing styles, far overpower the flyweight story that binds them together. B_a_t_m_a_n is a triumph of visual imagery over story. While Jack Nicholson is the top-billed star, his character is paper-thin and just as flat. We are down here to the level of villains whose biggest crimes can be explained only by nastiness. Nicholson apparently was chosen not because he had a single responsive chord for the man behind the famous face, but because both are known for their smirking. Nicholson does not even look the part. His face is not thin and angular enough and his non-angular body is better suited to playing the Penguin. Of course, it is a pity that the original model for the Joker is well past the point where he could have played the part. Conrad Veidt, best known for playing Col. Strasser in C_a_s_a_b_l_a_n_c_a and Cesar in C_a_b_i_n_e_t_o_f_D_r._C_a_l_i_g_a_r_i, played the title role in T_h_e_M_a_n_W_h_o_L_a_u_g_h_s, a poor wretch whose face is twisted into a perpetual rictus grin. His nightmarish look was reportedly the real inspiration for the Joker so he looked the role. Nicholson can be a decent actor but he lacks range and in spite of all the fuss and expectation, Michael Keaton is much better cast as Batman than Nicholson is as the Joker. Keaton, first of all, looks the part of Batman. That is not all that surprising if you realize what you are seeing is two eyes, a perpetual frown, and a chin. Everything else is plastic shell. Any actor with a chin and reasonable musculature could have looked good in the Batman suit. Keaton's role was a little more demanding when he played the man behind the mask--he is not a character out of Dostoevsky, understand, but his role did require a little acting and while he was neither superior nor memorable, he was at least equal to the role. Surprisingly, Michael Gough played against type as a sympathetic Alfred the butler (sort of a Batman's batman!). At one point he does severely overstep what the original Alfred would have done, but that is a script fault, not Gough's failing.

The story, what there is of it, gives us an origin for the Joker, a touch of one for Batman, and one fiendish though not very coherent scheme by the Joker which is, of course, foiled by Batman. I will not say much about the Joker's scheme, but it involves chemical contamination. The Joker makes the part about chemical contamination quite public, but apparently Batman is the only person to do a chemical analysis of the contaminated products. (To judge how likely that is, the Berkeley illness Letter reports, "The smoke from a single cigarette contains about 100 times more cyanide than did the two grapes from Chile that were impounded by government officials in March." Any idea how many chemical labs got involved in analysis after that tiny level of contamination was found? How likely do you find it that only Batman would do a complete chemical analysis of the Joker's product?) The plot also concerns what must be the world's tallest cathedral. At a minimum it looks to be at least fifty stories tall. That does not make for a believable story, but it is there for visual style more than credibility.

In the quote above, Adams talks about contradictory images, and that is precisely what B_a_t_m_a_n offers. There are wide mood swings from somber, dark, and brooding, to just exactly the sort of tongue-in-cheek campiness that the producers have long promised would n_o_t be in this film. Scenes of the Joker dancing Mardi Gras fashion to songs by Prince in front of cheering crowds are not classic Batman style by any means. And when Batman laments, "This is not exactly a normal world," this is not exactly a Batman sentiment. Also, one wonders how many worlds Batman has seen. Again and again the story stops--literally stops--in a time-out for a visual image. One of the most ridiculous of these has the Batplane break off a confrontation with the Joker so it can fly above the clouds and be seen outlined against the moon, looking like an aerial bat-symbol. If the script gives no explanation, the cheer of the audience does. Logic is less important than the visual image.

B_a_t_m_a_n is an art designer's film all the way. Gotham City is a highly stylized New York City with the art deco of the 1930s and the futuristic feel of Fritz Lang's (not Superman's) Metropolis. It is a collection of dark somber streets seen only at night or under overcast skies. This is a film without sunshine. To tie Gotham to the present, the mayor of the city was cast not for any acting ability, but because he looks like Ed Koch. In spite of the beautiful visual design for the

city, the eye still rebels because of the matte paintings and building models that are just not convincing as being anything but mattes and models. That is not a serious fault in a film with a strong story, but when a film's strongest suit is its art design, it becomes very important to execute those designs flawlessly.

Finally, a word about the music. Danny Elfman has written a decent score, but choosing Prince to write the songs, apparently for the nihilism of his previous work, was as big a blunder as choosing Nicholson for his smirk. Director Tim Burton claims to be a fan of Batman comic books, but it seems to me they were better than his film. I have to give the film a neutral 0 on the -4 to +4 scale. I guess I did not expect better, but I had hoped for it nonetheless.

Cable in July
Film comment by Mark R. Leeper
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A_c_e_i_n_t_h_e_H_o_l_e (Cinemax)
A_D_a_n_g_e_r_o_u_s_L_i_f_e (HBO)
E_m_p_i_r_e_o_f_t_h_e_S_u_n (Cinemax)
K_n_i_g_h_t_r_i_d_e_r_s (HBO)
M_u_r_p_h_y's_R_o_m_a_n_c_e (Cinemax)
M_r._S_m_i_t_h_G_o_e_s_t_o_W_a_s_h_i_n_g_t_o_n (Cinemax)

Looking over the cable listings for next month (I get the listings for Cinemax and HBO), I see an inordinate number of good films playing in July. If you either haven't seen some of these films or haven't seen them in a while, you might want to watch for them.

I tend to think of Billy Wilder as a maker of comedies, but he has made his share of serious and even biting films. The biting-est is A_c_e_i_n_t_h_e_H_o_l_e (television title: T_h_e_B_i_g_C_a_r_n_i_v_a_l). This 1951 film is one of the most powerful and bitter films of social comment ever made, but a g_r_e_a_t piece of filmmaking. Kirk Douglas plays a reporter who has been kicked off of every major Eastern paper and ends up on a tiny paper in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Then he stumbles on the makings of a good story: a man caught in a cave-in in an old Indian dwelling. Our hero decides to do a little manipulation of the locals to turn this into a national story. Wilder seems to have it in for the whole human race in

this film, but it is one powerful piece of filmmaking.

Another one you might not have seen in K_n_i_g_h_t_r_i_d_e_r_s. George Romero claims that whatever caused him to make this film he has gotten out of his system. Great! Now he can go back to making zombie movies, his idea of the culmination of the cinematic art. K_n_i_g_h_t_r_i_d_e_r_s follows a sort of traveling Renaissance show that stages jousts on motorcycles. Sound tacky? Stick with it. Romero has filled his story with vivid characters. This early film for Ed Harris set the tone for many of his later roles. This is a parable about commercialism and idealism that is worth seeing many times.

Filling three two-hour slots is A_D_a_n_g_e_r_o_u_s_L_i_f_e, a made-for-cable drama about the fall of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos. It starts as a sort of okay pot-boiler about a reporter torn between his wife and his mistress, but by the third episode the political backdrop is everything. You see blow-by-blow how a government falls. The film verges on downright inspirational. The viewer feels genuine exaltation when Marcos is finally forced out. The film should be all the more topical in the light of recent events in China.

I like E_m_p_i_r_e_o_f_t_h_e_S_u_n a lot. I think it is the best thing Spielberg ever did. I think it is a fine, literate adaptation of the

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novel by J. G. Ballard. Spielberg really captures on film what happens when panic seizes an entire city. This film has many great mementos for me. It was not to everyone's taste, but may well be the 1980s film that has moved me the most.

Two good sentimental films are M_u_r_p_h_y'_s_R_o_m_a_n_c_e with some good characterizations and the Frank Capra classic M_r._S_m_i_t_h_G_o_e_s_t_o_W_a_s_h_i_n_g_t_o_n, at once so anti-government and positive on our political system.

Unfortunately, American Movie Classics has not rerun the 1930s H_e_l'l's_A_n_g_e_l_s. They ran it in May and not again since. Watch for this one. No, it has nothing to do with motorcycles; it is a story about World War I aviation. The story is hokey, but the flying sequences are just spectacular. I would say right now that only the original K_i_n_g

_ K_ o_ n_ g matches this film for sheer spectacle, right up perhaps until _ S_ t_ a_ r
_ W_ a_ r_ s. The dirigible sequences are genuine jaw-droppers. There are
tremendous dogfight scenes, all filmed full-size and in the air, ladies
and gentlemen. It is amazing what stunt pilots will do for money.